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(with Deborah A. Gordon)

The Vulnerable Observer

Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart

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was thrown out of Cuba when I went in 1965?" Victor told him that he knew, but assured him things were different now, assured him that he'd get a warm welcome from the poets of the younger generation. But what Victor, a Cuban poet of the African diaspora, most wanted to say to Ginsberg, a quintessential poet of the Jewish Diaspora, was that he's the poet he most admires, and that one day he's going to write a Cuban version of *Howl*, that will begin with the same lines, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked. . . ."

But there wasn't time for Victor to offer his tribute. Our moment with the great American rebel poet was over. Ginsberg, already forgetting us, was busy signing the next book.

CHAPTER 6

Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart

When I sit down to make my stories I know very well that I want to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again. With that intention I cannot sort out myself, say this part is for the theorist, this for the poet, this for the editor, and this for the wayward ethnographer who only wants to document my experience.

—Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*

But, you may say, if I don't want to be in Texas, why am I here before a lectern in a hotel where the chandelier dangles by a thread? I don't know if it's the immigrant in me or the neurotic in me, but I am like that. Although I am here, I imagine there is somewhere else I ought to be instead. And so I don't stop tormenting myself: Is this where the voyage through the long tunnel leads? Is this why my parents left Cuba?

I should try, as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh urges, to dwell in the present moment. As he says, we ought not "to sacrifice the journey for the sake of the arrival."[1] So I remind myself that I am here, at the meeting of the American Ethnological Society, for a very good reason: to defend the kind of anthropology that matters to me. It is important to me that the meeting, this year, is organized by a Chicano anthropologist, José Limón; that the incoming president of the American Ethnological Society, Renato Rosaldo, is also a Chicano anthropologist; that Latina/Latino anthropologists are (maybe

for the first and last time) highly visible in the program; and that the theme of all our discussions is the border.

I am here because I am a woman of the border: between places, between identities, between languages, between cultures, between longings and illusions, one foot in the academy and one foot out. But I am also here because I have an intellectual debt to the Chicano critique of anthropology and the creative writing of Chicana authors. Beginning with Américo Paredes, it was Chicano and Chicana critics—not the Nuer—who turned around the anthropological mirror, questioning the way they had been represented by outsiders and offering their own, more complex and more lacerating representations, which made salient the question of who has the authority to speak for whom. It was the Chicano critique that wryly brought home the brutal role of subjectivity in cultural interpretation by pointing to the unreality and, even worse, the humorlessness of accounts written by Anglo anthropologists, who failed to understand when the natives were joking and when they were speaking seriously, and so produced parodies of the societies they intended to describe.[2] In turn, it was Chicana poets and writers who created new self-representations that not only included feminism but put the border on the map for all Latinas.[3]

I say I am here to "defend" the kind of anthropology that matters to me, which suggests that it is under attack. That may be too strong a way to put it, but lately there is tremendous anxiety that anthropology is becoming "activist art" overrun by "interpretive virtuosos."[4] And it is no exaggeration to say that anthropology is going through another terrible identity crisis. There have been crises before, about anthropology's complicity with conquest, with colonialism, with functionalism, with realist forms of representation, with racism, with male domination. But the discipline has always managed to

weather the storms and come out stronger, more inclusive, at once more vexed and more sure of itself.

This time, however, it may not recover so easily. There are serious problems. Many of them. For one thing, anthropology has lost exclusive rights over the culture concept, which was its birthright. The culture concept is now invoked not only across the disciplines, but far beyond the academy in an increasingly global society that is at pains to understand its various multiculturalisms.[5] Even anthropology's second-fiddle genre, the ethnography, has become the newly beloved form of a vast range of scholars, writers, artists, dancers, filmmakers, and talk show hosts. In our time, in this special period, this *periodo especial*, where bearing testimony and witnessing offer the only, and still slippery, hold on truth, every form of representation must pay homage to its roots in the ethnographic experience of talking, listening, transcribing, translating, and interpreting.

All this, you would think, should make anthropologists proud of themselves. How amazing—our vision of the world is actually *wanted* by the world. What incredible foresight we had, right? But the problem with such "appropriations" is that they threaten to leave anthropology without a place to hang its hat in the academy. The role that anthropology departments used to play as melting pots of vagabonds doing research in out-of-the-way places, where no one else wanted to go, is lately being filled by international institutes and area studies programs. And now that anthropologists have largely abandoned their old role as experts on the "origins" of our modern discontents, and too many of us are doing research at home, is there anything left that makes us unique? Has anthropology finally become dispensable?

The critics of the kind of anthropology that matters to me claim that the price anthropology must pay to survive into the

next century is to become science, or risk becoming nothing. Anthropology has always stood uneasily on the border between the humanities and the sciences. But in recent years there are more anthropologists—and interested outsiders—who want to place the discipline squarely within the territory of science. It is not too late, they say. Anthropology can be "reconquered" if its "grotesque tendencies"—postmodernist, feminist, relativist, multiculturalist—are reined in and anthropologists are enjoined "to abandon the pleasures of subjective narrativity for the fuddy-duddy rigors of empirical and statistical research."[6]

Clearly, there are important strategic reasons to induce anthropologists to re-fashion the discipline in ways that would allow it to pass better as science. Consider, as the 1994 Survey of Departments puts it, that "academic anthropology is a small discipline spread thinly across the land," with "only 16% of the nation's 2,157 colleges and universities presently offer[ing] an anthropology degree." Add to that the fact that, "in the academy, anthropology's size means that its programs are more vulnerable to changes than those of large disciplines, such as biology, psychology and history."[7]

Anthropology, what a vulnerable observer you are! You may well have to jump into the arms of the scientists if you are going to try to keep your grass hut in the academy.

But, you remind me, I am not in Texas to address anthropology's seduction by the scientists. No, I am here on a different mission—to defend the kind of anthropology that matters to me from the surprisingly ruthless criticism of the humanists.

The four panelists have spoken and now I must take the

stage. I am to play the role of discussant. This means I must come up with something brilliant to say about some ordinary academic papers. Something dramatic. In only fifteen minutes. To help my cause, I have put on a red knit top, a long tight black skirt, and high-heeled sandals that tie at the ankles. I feel daring, ready for a bullfight, and just a little dizzy. I stayed up almost the entire night worrying and writing, rewriting and worrying, a woman in a hotel room in Texas, listening to the graceful waltz of my husband and son breathing in their sleep. I begin, in that academic voice I have learned to turn on and off, like a faucet:

"The essays you have heard today are grappling, in different ways, with the fundamental shift that has taken place in anthropology in the last decade—the shift toward viewing identification, rather than difference, as the key defining image of our theory and practice. Our classical dichotomies of Self and Other, Subject and Object, the West and the Rest have become hopelessly inadequate in the face of feminist and minority cultural critiques, the growing strength of various forms of 'native' anthropology, and the increasing borderization of our world. Yet the shift toward an intersubjective, Self–Self relation challenges the boundaries of anthropological discourse and raises some crucial questions: Is the turn toward identification going to lead us to ever more insular forms of anthropology? Even to anthropology's demise? On the other hand, on a less apocalyptic note, couldn't we say that the new focus on the possibilities and limits of identification is making anthropology finally and truly possible by leading us toward greater depth of understanding, greater depth of feeling about those whom we write about? Of course, 'feeling' is one of the subjects being contested in the presentations

by literary critics Scott Michaelson and David Johnson, which urge us—not without feeling, I would add—to reconsider the role of the emotions not only in contemporary anthropology but in the academy and in cultural politics. This question of feeling, in turn, is related to the issues raised by the two anthropologists on the panel. To Jane Adams's question—to whom do we speak? And to Glen Perice's concern about the anxieties embedded in the relationships we form with our co-conspirators in the field. How might we speak so that we won't sell out to the dominant powers? Can we speak in a way that matters, in a way that will drive a wedge into the thick mud of business as usual?"

I look around the room. It is still quite early in the morning but there isn't a seat available. People are even standing in the back. The silence in the room is thick and heavy. Here and there, tucked among strangers, I see the familiar faces of colleagues, students, friends. I try to meet their gaze, to somehow show in a quick glance that I am grateful they have come, that I will do my best not to disappoint them. In those milliseconds when I am catching my breath, my eyes are scouring the entire room, trying to find him. The person I hope will hear these words. . . . No, he's not here. . . . It must be too painful. . . . But still I wish. . . . I turn to the far right corner and see José Limón, who looks more than a little apprehensive. But I look firmly in his direction and continue:

"When José Limón asked me to be the discussant for this panel, he warned me that the critique of Renato Rosaldo's work, from what he could gather of the abstracts, promised to be quite severe, even discomforting. Did I want to take it on? I didn't hesitate for a minute. If there was a strong challenge

out there to Renato Rosaldo's work, and especially to his 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage,' I needed to know about it. For me, 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage' is a classical work of vulnerable writing carried out in the service of attaining the most profound ethnographic empathy possible. In that essay, Rosaldo asserts that he only came to fully understand the meaning of the rage in grief, which characterizes Ilongot headhunting in the Philippines, after the sudden tragic death of his wife, the anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, while they were in the field. By courageously writing from his own grief, Renato Rosaldo returned to anthropology at a time when no return seemed possible."

I glance up and see Gabriel waving to me from the back of the room. What a wonderfully bright-eyed boy, a wonderfully long-legged boy. I wink at him and smile. He waves again, and as he leaves the room with David, I want to throw an invisible net around him, to protect him from all wounds, all hurts, all fears, all sadnesses. I think of Michelle Rosaldo, falling from the cliff to her death. Michelle was on her way to look over a new fieldwork site. She had good strong legs. She wasn't afraid. She expected to be back before nightfall. Renato had stayed in the old site with their two young sons. She told him to get the kids ready for bed. She'd be back to read them a story. But on the cliff, she lost her footing. And they came to tell Renato. And it was Renato who had to go find her at the bottom of the cliff. And yell at her for dying and not saying good-bye. And take her broken body to her Jewish grave in New York. And leave the Philippines. Leave and not return. And mourn. Mourn. By himself. For a long time. And then mourn with the Ilongots. In memory. With hindsight. And then mourn with other anthropologists, by writing an essay, unheard of until

then in the history of anthropology, that is nothing less than an act of *shivah*—"to dwell with loss, to recover one's poverty, to be linked together in the presence of those absent and to give them . . . an everlasting name."[8]

"This is, obviously, a timely moment to discuss Renato Rosaldo's work in all its complexity and contradictions. As Renato now becomes president of the American Ethnological Society, his essay 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage' marks its twelfth anniversary. Indeed, that essay was first delivered at a meeting of the American Ethnological Society. It is an essay that marked a turning point, not only for Rosaldo himself, but for anthropology, and certainly it deserves a most careful and engaged reading. I am grateful to Scott Michaelson and David Johnson for beginning that reading in their papers, and more generally for seeking to expand the boundaries of literary discourse by turning their analytical lens to an anthropological text. I welcome them to this meeting and hope their presence signals the beginning of more exchanges between anthropologists and literary critics."

I immediately feel foolish, like a hostess at the garden party of anthropology welcoming the foreign guests from the land of literary criticism and trying to put them at their ease. I try to smile in the direction of Michaelson and Johnson who glance back at me indifferently.

"Yet I disagree with many, indeed most, of the ways in which Michaelson and Johnson read Rosaldo's work. They accuse Rosaldo of ushering in a 'new sentimentalism' that is actually an old sentimentalism, says Michaelson, based in nineteenth-

century Victorian women's culture, and anachronistic 'in the late twentieth century . . . after decades of Freudianisms, structuralisms, and post-structuralisms.' He feels—or rather thinks—that scholars in literature and anthropology are returning to questions that absorbed Nathaniel Hawthorne and Harriet Beecher Stowe, returning to universal humanist thinking. Johnson, in turn, finds suspect the recent turn toward viewing 'the former "objects" of ethnographical inquiry, cultural others, as being like us, subjects.' He feels—or rather thinks—that this trend toward doing away with the ideology of the transcendental observer is giving personal experience too much weight in ethnography. The difficulty is that personal experience, in his view, 'is what no one would be obliged to believe, to trust, perhaps not even to concede.'

"Although both Michaelson and Johnson read Rosaldo attentively, they have curiously chosen to disregard one of his central points—namely, the key role that the position of the observer plays in social analysis, including, I would think, literary analysis. Let me put it more colloquially: I want to know where Michaelson and Johnson are coming from. What is at stake for them in their critiques? I can only begin to guess at an answer to that question, since neither of them are reflexive about their own intellectual process and criticism. But reading them with feminist eyes, I am struck by the obvious—that here we have two men criticizing the work of another man who has made himself extremely vulnerable while refusing to make themselves vulnerable in how they read him. It is difficult not to invoke Harold Bloom and the anxiety of influence. It is difficult not to see the Michaelson/Johnson critique in terms of the quintessential drama of the male writer's Oedipal slaying of powerful male literary precur-

sors. It is difficult not to see in these critiques the desire of two young scholars to get 'a head' by decapitating a father—it would not, alas, be the first case of headhunting in the academy."

I know I'm being clever, even obnoxiously clever. Michaelson and Johnson look straight ahead, past me, past the audience.

"My interpretation is further complicated by the fact that Renato is a literary father who is self-consciously taking on feminist, even 'feminine' positions. He is cross-dressing as it were. In *Culture and Truth*, he is explicit in his critique of Max Weber's 'manly' ethic, which, as he puts it, 'underestimates the analytical possibilities of "womanly weaknesses" and "unmanly states," such as rage, feebleness, frustration, depression, embarrassment, and passion.'[9] Daring to speak of his sorrow, of his loss, his rage, daring, yes, to privilege sentiments, he dares to be 'feminine'—that is, feminine in the terms of our cultural logic and the way we ascribe genders to our writing. And immediately the sons come along to chastise him for not being *macho* enough."

Here I pause. I think I can drink something now, at this moment. But then I remember that I left my glass of ice water at the far end of the podium where I was sitting. I must keep going with a dry throat.

"The chastising is carried out in the name of Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo. Michaelson writes that Renato views mourning as something that cannot be collapsed within ritual 'because

emotions are primary, real, and fundamentally human.' Yet, with an almost wicked sense of righteousness, he points out that, in contrast, 'Michelle argues that emotions are produced in the first place through the mechanisms of routine and ritual.' He concludes, cruelly, I think, that Michelle's death 'finally permits' Renato 'to critique her.' And to wound just a little more, he adds that Michelle's death gives Renato a newfound sense of ethnographic authority, a sense that he is 'capable of feeling everything the Ilongot do. He recognizes their emotions, including their anger, within himself. . . . The experience of "rage" in grief is the same for both the Ilongot and Renato Rosaldo.' Johnson follows the same harsh path in his criticism. He insists that, regardless of the new turn toward subjectivity, 'anthropology needs an object' and that 'object' is Michelle Rosaldo's dead body. Her 'inert body guarantees the immediate repositioning of the subject, of the I of ethnography. . . . Over her dead body anthropology finds itself.' Listening to these crude words—especially for many here in the audience who knew Michelle Rosaldo—is terribly painful. One wants to mourn the use of such language, which resuscitates Michelle Rosaldo only to kill her for a second time. Yet both Michaelson and Johnson, I want to believe, have to believe, are trying desperately to imagine 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage' from Michelle Rosaldo's perspective. I think they are sincere in feeling compelled to try to hear her voice, in defending the anthropology for which she stood, in seeking to keep the memory of her work alive."

My pulse is starting to race. I'm going to say what I've been holding back, what I think I've now earned the right to say after speaking intelligently and cleverly.

"Michelle Rosaldo's death had a huge impact on me. I was a graduate student, just back from a year of fieldwork in northern Spain, when news of her death reached us at Princeton. It terrified me. Gave me nightmares. I'd heard Michelle Rosaldo speak at Princeton just a year before—"

What I remember is this: she sat in the front of the long seminar table, patiently peeling an orange and eating it, segment by segment, as she spoke, and she caught my glance once and held it, hard, and I thought, she's not tender, she's of that generation of women that didn't get anything easy, and afterward I didn't try talking to her, I felt too weak, too uncertain about everything.

"And I thought—how could such a strong woman, such an important feminist anthropologist, die? And die like that, in the field, in that place charged with so much symbolism, that place where we, as women, become 'honorary males' and thus *macha* enough to gain acceptance into the anthropology club, which is so profoundly rooted in male quests and male musings about foreign lands?"

Yes, that was what had scared me most: that you could die doing fieldwork, that the danger of dying was real, because fieldwork is about nothing more primitive than confronting, with our contemporaries, our own mortality.

"We can only begin to imagine what direction feminist anthropology might have taken if Michelle Rosaldo were still alive today. And yet I don't think that Michaelson and Johnson do any service to Michelle Rosaldo in their efforts to resurrect her and pit her work on the emotions against the work of her

grieving husband. The agency they grant her is patronizing, at best. And, at worst, Michaelson and Johnson are disrespectful and insensitive in the way they speak about her as merely a body. Renato, it seems to me, never, never does that—rather, in the process of mourning and healing he incorporates aspects of Michelle's life and work into his own life and work, including her feminism, her attention to the language of emotion, her concern to bridge the border between the private and the public. We must honor the dead, never walk on their tombs if we can help it."

Once, at Michigan, on my way to my office, on an especially gloomy day, I'd stopped and stared at the skulls in the paleoanthropology lab. Like a medieval ascetic, I brought my face close to a skull and pondered my own dissolution and thought of the legacy of the intellectual discipline to which I'd attached myself, this discipline which is so wrapped up with graves, with tombstones, with burial practices, with scraping away at layers upon layers of dead civilizations, with offerings left to those who are no longer with us, this discipline which, as Claude Lévi-Strauss put it in *Tristes Tropiques*, that most melancholy of ethnographies, is "so tormented by remorse."[10] Too often, when people find out I'm an anthropologist, they ask: "Have you dug up any interesting bones lately?"

"'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage' is itself a kind of tomb, a memorial to Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, and we must tread on it lightly. That essay, it seems to me, clearly marks the end of Rosaldo's sojourn as an anthropologist in the Philippines. Forced to part with Michelle, he also parts ways with the Ilongot, though he holds on to them both emotionally and intellectually. But that ending also marks a new beginning, a

threshold for Renato, a return home. It is only after 'Grief and a Headhunter's Rage' that Renato comes out actively as a Chicano intellectual and develops his position as a theorist of the meaning of citizenship in the United States. He didn't do his research in the Philippines from a Chicano borderlands perspective, but rather from the perspective of a Harvard-trained anthropologist, very much influenced by a classical concept of culture which could only speak of natives in native lands, a concept of culture which was still inarticulate about borders. Anthropologists would only become articulate about borders thanks to the writing of Chicanas like Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros—who had to invent their own borderland anthropology in poetry, myths, and fictions because it didn't exist in the academy."

No, he hasn't come. . . . There's too much pain. I think I understand, but I don't. I still wish. . . . Later, they will tell me he sat in the lobby, alone, while I spoke.

"In my view, it isn't an accident that the effort to engage with the emotions in current anthropological and feminist writing follows upon Freudianisms, structuralisms, and poststructuralisms. I think what we are seeing are efforts to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life. Consider, for example, the debate around Bill T. Jones's dance work 'Still/Here,' which was sparked by Arlene Croce's *New Yorker* essay where she announced she had refused to see the work on the grounds that his use of dancing inspired by the movements of HIV-positive dancers and video testimony by AIDS patients

turned the art of dance into 'victim art,' a 'traveling medicine show.' As Homi Bhabha notes, what disturbs Croce about so-called 'victim art' is that its effect is 'to solicit sympathy and collusion, rather than disinterested critical reading.'[11] The anxiety around such work is that it will prove to be beyond criticism, that it will be undiscussable. But the real problem is that we need other forms of criticism, which are rigorous yet not disinterested; forms of criticism which are not immune to catharsis; forms of criticism which can respond vulnerably, in ways we must begin to try to imagine."

On an airplane, a few months later—coming back from a conference in San Francisco about women's health, where I think I made myself extremely vulnerable by talking about my panic episode—I will sit next to a woman from Detroit whose mother was murdered. "Your mother murdered!" I will say, in a voice cracking with astonishment rather than with compassion. Yes, by the newspaper boy. Shot her. He was on drugs. I will look at the woman's face and ask: "But aren't you enraged? How do you live with the loss of your mother? How do you live with the fact that her murderer is still alive?" And she will say to me: "I belong to a group called Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation. I am against the death penalty. I have traveled up and down the California coast, talking to legislators, talking to victims, talking to teachers, teaching that you can't solve violence with more violence. You must forgive." This woman, I will think, is another angel in my path. Mourning, she reminds me, "is not replacing the dead but making a place for something else to be in relation to the past. . . . We bring the past to the present, we allow ourselves to experience what we have lost, and also what we are—that we are—despite this loss."[12] The

Ilongot, as I have learned from Renato Rosaldo, don't forgive. What they don't forgive is death. No, death cannot be forgiven. Can I be horribly honest? I am afraid. Too afraid to even imagine a headhunt.

"Michaelson asks: 'Of what value are sorrow and tears? How can one put them to use for purposes of a life politics?' Let me try to answer what is perhaps intended to be nothing more than a rhetorical question, a question for which no answer is really desired. I think of the film *Shoah*, which is a working through of sorrow, because all the tears have already been cried. Claude Lanzmann's aim is not to present gruesome images from the past, but to grapple with the impossibility of telling the story of the Holocaust. His effort is to 'screen loss.' He wants to make 'present in the film the absence of the dead.' Lanzmann returns with his camera to the prosaic sites where Jews passed from the normal world to the world of the camp. He goes back to the station building, the rails, the platforms, which are just as they were in 1942, not changed at all. 'I needed that,' Lanzmann says, 'a permanence of iron, of steel. I needed to attach myself to it.' He films survivors crossing the line between the world of the camp and the rest of the world. He films the distance, between present and past, the living and the dead. 'They can cross over, but neither they nor we are anywhere but in the present.'"[13]

No, we are nowhere but in the present. And I am here, in Texas, where I didn't think I wanted to be, but since I am here, I take a deep breath, and smile, and take joy that I am alive, and like a melodramatic soap opera star or maybe a country-western singer with a taut guitar, I look my audience in the eye

and get ready to belt out those words I wrote very late at night when I was very tired and just wanted to get to sleep and forget everything. And I say:

"Call it sentimental, call it Victorian and nineteenth century, but I say that anthropology that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore."

And I mean it. Really mean it. Because my heart is broken. Because the one person I wish had heard me sing this lament for him isn't here. Can't be here.